

The Five Stages of Beef

Peter Parrish

It was not the largest cow he had ever seen. Nonetheless, it was in his way. This posed a problem.

Jimmy slammed the door of his car a little harder than the hinges would appreciate, then stood in the roadside and scratched his chin. He had hoped the door slamming incident would startle the cow into moving. He was an optimistic sort.

"Look," said Jimmy, "I don't mean to bother you, but could you shift yourself onto the grass verge there?"

Engaging a cow in reasoned debate. He was really pushing optimism to the limit.

"Only I'm a bit late already and I could really do with being home by three."

"I'm afraid not," said the cow, in a tone which skirted the boundaries of disinterest. "I grew tired of feeling greenery beneath my hooves and decided to experiment with tarmac, which, it transpires, is to my liking." The animal positively radiated regal contentment.

Jimmy sighed. It was going to be one of those afternoons.

"I appreciate your candour, Ms ...," He floundered for a while, but received no immediate help and so pressed gamely onwards. "I'm pleased for you, I truly am. A change of scenery can be just the thing to put the spark back into life." Again he paused, hoping to meet the creature's eyes. Eye contact was important for diplomacy, he'd read that somewhere. "But the thing is, you being of the bovine persuasion and all, I don't really believe you should be talking."

Leaning back against the bonnet, Jimmy quietly assumed victory. The problem of obstruction may remain, but the battle of wits would surely be his.

For a spell, the cow seemed placated. Her tail swished lazily, scattering inquisitive insects in the balmy August sunshine. Then she spoke.

"Why shouldn't I be talking?" The dismissive veil had dropped, replaced by a softer, melodic meter that, it seemed to Jimmy, was somewhat forced. He couldn't see any teeth, but suspected they may be gritted. If, indeed, this was common practice amongst talking cows.

"You started the conversation, I merely followed your lead. Do you consider yourself to be my better?" Another swish of the tail; this time with purpose, or perhaps irritation. "Anyway, if I'm not talking at this moment then we can only presume that you are quite, quite mad."

On balance, Jimmy decided he would rather not presume that. Life had already become considerably more complex in the last few minutes, and introducing the possibility of a fragile mental state was simply out of the question. He drummed his fingertips nervously

against the bumper of his vehicle and reassessed the situation. This was ridiculous. Why was he allowing himself to be verbally pummelled by a domesticated beast?

Reasoned debate was plainly leading nowhere. It was time to reassert the kind of dominance which had seen humanity rise to the top of nature's carnivorous pyramid. Whether his prehistoric ancestors had ever triumphed over talking cows was a matter of some debate, but there was no time for worrying about that now. Not now that he was springing to his feet and marching towards his adversary with a wagging finger of intent.

"Now look here," the finger ceased wagging and began to jab; poking and prodding the air as though searching for an invisible button with which to switch off this ludicrous encounter. "As a member of the human race I *am* your superior, and I demand to be allowed to pass."

He felt quite flustered, the heat of the day was taking its toll and his collar was beginning to stick sweatily to the reddening skin of his neck. Jimmy was well aware that confrontation was not his forte, but this self-awareness only increased his annoyance. It didn't help that the cow's broad mouth appeared to have reshaped into something resembling a grin.

"Have you finished?" said the something resembling a grin. "Only I'm hoping there's more, because this is terribly entertaining."

"Oh, laughing at me are you? I'll give you something to..."

Jimmy's flaccid rebellion was silenced by the sharp crack of hoof against asphalt. The air hung still in the aftermath, displaced only by the twitching of a tattered brown ear. Even the

insects held a respectful silence.

"As I was saying," the cow said finally, penetrating the calm in a fashion particular to verbose cattle, "I think it's a little foolish of you to use the capacity for independent thought as a reason for me to move, as it's fairly clear that I also possess this ability. In fact, by that definition I think I'm just as human as you. Perhaps more so, actually, judging by recent events."

This rebuke toppled Jimmy over the slender precipice of control. He rediscovered himself behind the windscreen of his car, where his knuckles had slowly fused with the steering wheel and were shining a brilliant white. His foot had found the accelerator and begun a methodical revving motion. Precisely how much time had passed, he couldn't say.

The cow was still there. Facing him. Egging him on. Urging him to speed forward into the inevitable repair bill. It was a challenge. Run me down, double your problems. Put your inhumanity beyond doubt.

Shuddering, Jimmy released his grip on the wheel, sending pins and needles zig-zagging through his digits. He wearily shook his head and clambered back out onto the road.

"Alright, what do you want?"

"I want to enjoy the rest of my day in the middle of this road without any further interruptions, thank you."

"Oh for ...," Jimmy took a deep breath and hauled himself back together. "What I mean is, there must be something you need. Something I can provide in return for being allowed to pass?"

The cow maintained a stoic expression.

"Well ..." she said.

"Yes?" Jimmy countered hopefully.

"Now that you mention it ..."

"Go on."

"... now that you mention it, I've come to the realisation that there is nothing in the world I desire more than simply being able to stand right here in the sunshine."

Jimmy's face sank to abject defeat. He slumped down onto the road, feeling the warmth of a day's absorbed heat creeping through the seat of his trousers. It brought no comfort. What little remained of his optimistic self drained out through the soles of his shoes, replaced by a meekly accepted top-up of futility. His head dropped into his waiting hands. He was a curled ball of despair on a rigid canvas.

On the whole, it hadn't turned out to be the best of days.

A dampness on the back of his palms took Jimmy by surprise. At first he mistook it for a fine mist of exasperated tears that had crept out without warning, but it was too immediate, too localised for that. The damp intensified, accompanied by a pressing sensation and a feeling like leather brushing against his skin. His head jerked upwards with a start, out of the soothing, foetal embrace. He was inches away from a large nose, attached to a passive, bovine face.

"If you've come to finish me off, forget it." Jimmy sulkily forced the words out. "You've already won, I'm through with this."

The cow appeared quizzical. "Won?" she said, "I just wanted to make sure you were alright. You seemed rather vexed."

For the first time in his life, Jimmy understood what it meant for one's eyes to boggle. "Of course I'm vexed, I can't get home because I'm trapped in a maddening battle of rhetoric with a talking cow!"

"Ah," said the cow.

"Yes," replied Jimmy. "Ah, indeed."

The animal's long face studied the ground, moving her hooves in a way that might have been interpreted as a shuffle.

"I wasn't aware it meant that much to you. We cows don't really have homes, as such.

We're lodgers, mostly."

"Mm," said Jimmy, folding his arms.

"Well, anyway ..." for a spell it seemed as though she'd simply tailed off, but the thread was eventually rediscovered and quickly unravelled, "... I apologise, I suppose, for keeping you here, but your disbelief was quite hurtful."

Jimmy felt that this was probably the closest he was going to get to contrition from conversational cattle.

"Thanks," he said "It was just a bit surprising for me, the whole talking cow thing."

The cow seemed to nod.

"And I behaved quite appallingly too," he offered.

"Oh no, forget all that," the cow's tail flicked away more insects as she spoke with a certain warmth for the first time, "just try not to take us for granted."

With that she stepped aside, onto the lush verge which rose on either side of the lane.

Jimmy gave her a cheery wave as he passed by. He thought she looked a little sad.

Away he drove. Down the bumpy farm lane flanked by stone-wall and hedgerows, across

the junction with the blind bend, and over the arching bridge which spanned the babbling waters. Onwards he travelled, through the village with a tiny church, past the post office where he'd once had to buy an emergency birthday card and out beyond the green fringes of the countryside. Right to the edges of town, where life blurred into grey.

He turned into his driveway and retrieved the shopping bags from the back of the car, slamming the door a little harder than the hinges would appreciate. A few startled birds took flight from the garden next door. Digging for keys, he tested the handle and found the house unlocked. Home again.

Hearing his return, Jimmy's girlfriend glanced up from the book she was reading at the kitchen table. She knew what this lateness meant. He'd had another of his vegetarian relapse dilemmas.

"Burgers for tea, is it?" she asked.

Peter Parrish has a curious condition which forces him to undertake alliterative activities at all times. As a result, he has penned prose, fashioned fiction and written words for several sources including Stylus Magazine, eMusic, Eurogamer and the Press Association. He has made one anthology appearance in "More Tonto Short Stories."

[\(http://www.tontobooks.com/mtss/\)](http://www.tontobooks.com/mtss/)